

The Harlem Renaissance

MAIN IDEA

African-American ideas, politics, art, literature, and music flourished in Harlem and elsewhere in the United States.

WHY IT MATTERS NOW

The Harlem Renaissance provided a foundation of African-American intellectualism to which African-American writers, artists, and musicians contribute today.

Terms & Names

- **Zora Neale Hurston**
- **James Weldon Johnson**
- **Marcus Garvey**
- **Harlem Renaissance**
- **Claude McKay**
- **Langston Hughes**
- **Paul Robeson**
- **Louis Armstrong**
- **Duke Ellington**
- **Bessie Smith**

One American's Story

When the spirited **Zora Neale Hurston** was a girl in Eatonville, Florida, in the early 1900s, she loved to read adventure stories and myths. The powerful tales struck a chord with the young, talented Hurston and made her yearn for a wider world.



A Personal Voice ZORA NEALE HURSTON

"My soul was with the gods and my body in the village. People just would not act like gods. . . . Raking back yards and carrying out chamber-pots, were not the tasks of Thor. I wanted to be away from drabness and to stretch my limbs in some mighty struggle."

—quoted in *The African American Encyclopedia*

After spending time with a traveling theater company and attending Howard University, Hurston ended up in New York where she struggled to the top of African-American literary society by hard work, flamboyance, and, above all, grit. "I have seen that the world is to the strong regardless of a little pigmentation more or less," Hurston wrote later. "I do not weep at [being Negro]—I am too busy sharpening my oyster knife." Hurston was on the move, like millions of others. And, like them, she went after the pearl in the oyster—the good life in America.



VIDEO

JUMP AT THE SUN:
Zora Neale Hurston and the Harlem Renaissance

African-American Voices in the 1920s

During the 1920s, African Americans set new goals for themselves as they moved north to the nation's cities. Their migration was an expression of their changing attitude toward themselves—an attitude perhaps best captured in a phrase first used around this time, "Black is beautiful."

THE MOVE NORTH Between 1910 and 1920, in a movement known as the Great Migration, hundreds of thousands of African Americans had uprooted

themselves from their homes in the South and moved north to the big cities in search of jobs. By the end of the decade, 5.2 million of the nation's 12 million African Americans—over 40 percent—lived in cities. Zora Neale Hurston documented the departure of some of these African Americans.

A Personal Voice ZORA NEALE HURSTON

"Some said goodbye cheerfully . . . others fearfully, with terrors of unknown dangers in their mouths . . . others in their eagerness for distance said nothing. The daybreak found them gone. The wind said North."

—quoted in *Sorrow's Kitchen: The Life and Folklore of Zora Neale Hurston*

MAIN IDEA

Analyzing Effects

A How did the influx of African Americans change Northern cities?

However, Northern cities in general had not welcomed the massive influx of African Americans. Tensions had escalated in the years prior to 1920, culminating, in the summer of 1919, in approximately 25 urban race riots. A

AFRICAN-AMERICAN GOALS Founded in 1909, The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) urged African Americans to protest racial violence. W. E. B. Du Bois, a founding member of the NAACP, led a parade of 10,000 African-American men in New York to protest such violence. Du Bois also used the NAACP's magazine, *The Crisis*, as a platform for leading a struggle for civil rights.

Under the leadership of **James Weldon Johnson**—poet, lawyer, and NAACP executive secretary—the organization fought for legislation to protect African-American rights. It made antilynching laws one of its main priorities. In 1919, three antilynching bills were introduced in Congress, although none was passed. The NAACP continued its campaign through antilynching organizations that had been established in 1892 by Ida B. Wells. Gradually, the number of lynchings dropped. The NAACP represented the new, more militant voice of African Americans.

MARCUS GARVEY AND THE UNIA Although many African Americans found their voice in the NAACP, they still faced daily threats and discrimination. **Marcus Garvey,** an immigrant from Jamaica, believed that African Americans should build a separate society. His different, more radical message of black pride aroused the hopes of many.

In 1914, Garvey founded the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA). In 1918, he moved the UNIA to New York City and opened offices in urban ghettos in order to recruit followers. By the mid-1920s, Garvey claimed he had a million followers. He appealed to African Americans with a combination of spellbinding oratory, mass meetings, parades, and a message of pride.

Vocabulary

oratory: the art of public speaking

A Personal Voice MARCUS GARVEY

"In view of the fact that the black man of Africa has contributed as much to the world as the white man of Europe, and the brown man and yellow man of Asia, we of the Universal Negro Improvement Association demand that the white, yellow, and brown races give to the black man his place in the civilization of the world. We ask for nothing more than the rights of 400 million Negroes."

—speech at Liberty Hall, New York City, 1922

KEY PLAYER

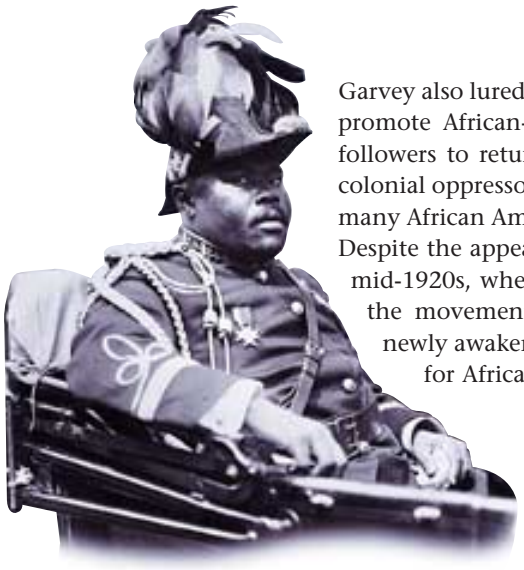


JAMES WELDON JOHNSON 1871–1938

James Weldon Johnson worked as a school principal, newspaper editor, and lawyer in Florida. In 1900, he wrote the lyrics for "Lift Every Voice and Sing," the song that became known as the black national anthem. The first stanza begins as follows:

"Lift every voice and sing
Till earth and heaven ring,
Ring with the harmonies of Liberty;
Let our rejoicing rise
High as the listening skies,
Let it resound loud as the rolling sea."

In the 1920s, Johnson straddled the worlds of politics and art. He served as executive secretary of the NAACP, spearheading the fight against lynching. In addition, he wrote well-known works, such as *God's Trombones*, a series of sermon-like poems, and *Black Manhattan*, a look at black cultural life in New York during the Roaring Twenties.



▲ Marcus Garvey designed this uniform of purple and gold, complete with feathered hat, for his role as "Provisional President of Africa."

Garvey also lured followers with practical plans, especially his program to promote African-American businesses. Further, Garvey encouraged his followers to return to Africa, help native people there throw off white colonial oppressors, and build a mighty nation. His idea struck a chord in many African Americans, as well as in blacks in the Caribbean and Africa. Despite the appeal of Garvey's movement, support for it declined in the mid-1920s, when he was convicted of mail fraud and jailed. Although the movement dwindled, Garvey left behind a powerful legacy of newly awakened black pride, economic independence, and reverence for Africa. B

MAIN IDEA

Summarizing

B What approach to race relations did Marcus Garvey promote?

The Harlem Renaissance Flowers in New York

Many African Americans who migrated north moved to Harlem, a neighborhood on the Upper West Side of New York's Manhattan Island. In the 1920s, Harlem became the world's largest black urban community, with residents from the South, the West Indies, Cuba, Puerto Rico, and Haiti. James Weldon Johnson described Harlem as the capital of black America.

A Personal Voice JAMES WELDON JOHNSON

"Harlem is not merely a Negro colony or community, it is a city within a city, the greatest Negro city in the world. It is not a slum or a fringe, it is located in the heart of Manhattan and occupies one of the most beautiful . . . sections of the city. . . . It has its own churches, social and civic centers, shops, theaters, and other places of amusement. And it contains more Negroes to the square mile than any other spot on earth."

—"Harlem: The Culture Capital"

Like many other urban neighborhoods, Harlem suffered from overcrowding, unemployment, and poverty. But its problems in the 1920s were eclipsed by a flowering of creativity called the **Harlem Renaissance,** a literary and artistic movement celebrating African-American culture.

AFRICAN–AMERICAN WRITERS Above all, the Harlem Renaissance was a literary movement led by well-educated, middle-class African Americans who expressed a new pride in the African-American experience. They celebrated their heritage and wrote with defiance and poignancy about the trials of being black in a white world. W. E. B. Du Bois and James Weldon Johnson helped these young talents along, as did the Harvard-educated former Rhodes scholar Alain Locke. In 1925, Locke published *The New Negro*, a landmark collection of literary works by many promising young African-American writers.

Claude McKay, a novelist, poet, and Jamaican immigrant, was a major figure whose militant verses urged African Americans to resist prejudice and discrimination. His poems also expressed the pain of life in the black ghettos and the strain of being black in a world dominated by whites. Another gifted writer of the time was Jean Toomer. His experimental book *Cane*—a mix of poems and sketches about blacks in the North and the South—was among the first full-length literary publications of the Harlem Renaissance.

Missouri-born **Langston Hughes** was the movement's best-known poet. Many of Hughes's 1920s poems described the difficult lives of working-class African Americans. Some of his poems moved to the tempo of jazz and the blues. (See Literature in the Jazz Age on page 458.)

Harlem in the 1920s

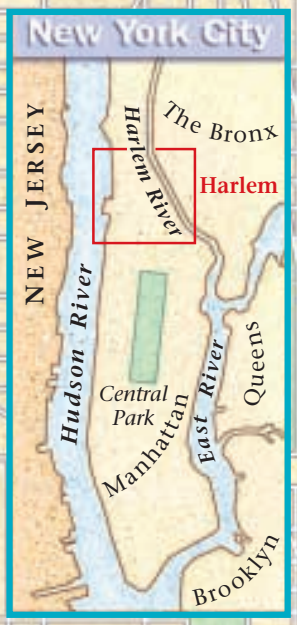
At the turn of the century, New York's Harlem neighborhood was overbuilt with new apartment houses. Enterprising African-American realtors began buying and leasing property to other African Americans who were eager to move into the prosperous neighborhood. As the number of blacks in Harlem increased, many whites began moving out. Harlem quickly grew to become the center of black America and the birthplace of the political, social, and cultural movement known as the Harlem Renaissance.

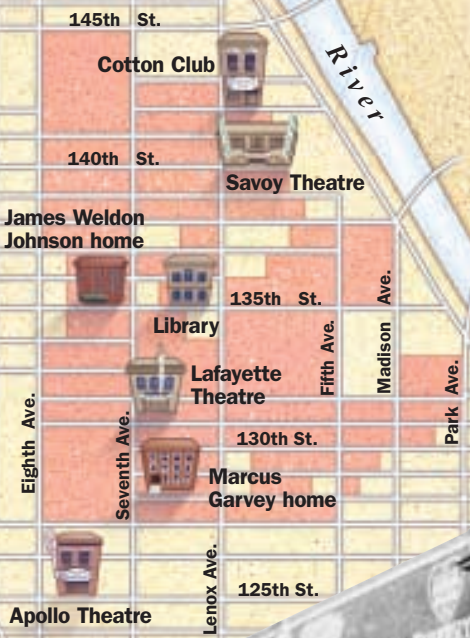


The Fletcher Henderson Orchestra became one of the most influential jazz bands during the Harlem Renaissance. Here, Henderson, the band's founder, sits at the piano, with Louis Armstrong on trumpet (rear, center).



In the mid 1920s, the Cotton Club was one of a number of fashionable entertainment clubs in Harlem. Although many venues like the Cotton Club were segregated, white audiences packed the clubs to hear the new music styles of black performers such as Duke Ellington and Bessie Smith.





In 1927, Harlem was a bustling neighborhood.

In many of her novels, short stories, poems, and books of folklore, Zora Neale Hurston portrayed the lives of poor, unschooled Southern blacks—in her words, "the greatest cultural wealth of the continent." Much of her work celebrated what she called the common person's art form—the simple folkways and values of people who had survived slavery through their ingenuity and strength. C

MAIN IDEA

Synthesizing

C In what ways did writers of the Harlem Renaissance celebrate a "rebirth"?

AFRICAN–AMERICAN PERFORMERS The spirit and talent of the Harlem Renaissance reached far beyond the world of African-American writers and intellectuals. Some observers, including Langston Hughes, thought the movement was launched with *Shuffle Along*, a black musical comedy popular in 1921. "It gave just the proper push . . . to that Negro vogue of the '20s," he wrote. Several songs in *Shuffle Along*, including "Love Will Find a Way," won popularity among white audiences. The show also spotlighted the talents of several black performers, including the singers Florence Mills, Josephine Baker, and Mabel Mercer.

During the 1920s, African Americans in the performing arts won large followings. The tenor Roland Hayes rose to stardom as a concert singer, and the singer and actress Ethel Waters debuted on Broadway in the musical *Africana*. **Paul Robeson,** the son of a one-time slave, became a major dramatic actor. His performance in Shakespeare's *Othello*, first in London and later in New York City, was widely acclaimed. Subsequently, Robeson struggled with the racism he experienced in the United States and the indignities inflicted upon him because of his support of the Soviet Union and the Communist Party. He took up residence abroad, living for a time in England and the Soviet Union.

Background

See Historical Spotlight on page 617.



The Hot Five included (*from left*) Louis Armstrong, Johnny St. Cyr, Johnny Dodds, Kid Ory, and Lil Hardin Armstrong.

AFRICAN AMERICANS AND JAZZ Jazz was born in the early 20th century in New Orleans, where musicians blended instrumental ragtime and vocal blues into an exuberant new sound. In 1918, Joe "King" Oliver and his Creole Jazz Band traveled north to Chicago, carrying jazz with them. In 1922, a young trumpet player named **Louis Armstrong** joined Oliver's group, which became known as the Creole Jazz Band. His talent rocketed him to stardom in the jazz world.

Famous for his astounding sense of rhythm and his ability to improvise, Armstrong made personal expression a key part of jazz. After two years in Chicago, in 1924 he joined Fletcher Henderson's band, then the most important big jazz band in New York City. Armstrong went on to become perhaps the most important and influential musician in the history of jazz. He often talked about his anticipated funeral.

A Personal Voice LOUIS ARMSTRONG

"They're going to blow over me. Cats will be coming from everywhere to play. I had a beautiful life. When I get to the Pearly Gates I'll play a duet with Gabriel. We'll play 'Sleepy Time Down South.' He wants to be remembered for his music just like I do."

—quoted in *The Negro Almanac*

Jazz quickly spread to such cities as Kansas City, Memphis, and New York City, and it became the most popular music for dancing. During the 1920s, Harlem pulsed to the sounds of jazz, which lured throngs of whites to the showy, exotic nightclubs there, including the famed Cotton Club. In the late 1920s, **Edward Kennedy "Duke" Ellington,** a jazz pianist and composer, led his

ten-piece orchestra at the Cotton Club. In a 1925 essay titled "The Negro Spirituals," Alain Locke seemed almost to predict the career of the talented Ellington.

A Personal Voice ALAIN LOCKE

"Up to the present, the resources of Negro music have been tentatively exploited in only one direction at a time–melodically here, rhythmically there, harmonically in a third direction. A genius that would organize its distinctive elements in a formal way would be the musical giant of his age."

—quoted in *Afro-American Writing: An Anthology of Prose and Poetry*

Through the 1920s and 1930s, Ellington won renown as one of America's greatest composers, with pieces such as "Mood Indigo" and "Sophisticated Lady."

Cab Calloway, a talented drummer, saxophonist, and singer, formed another important jazz orchestra, which played at Harlem's Savoy Ballroom and the Cotton Club, alternating with Duke Ellington. Along with Louis Armstrong, Calloway popularized "scat," or improvised jazz singing using sounds instead of words.

Bessie Smith, a female blues singer, was perhaps the outstanding vocalist of the decade. She recorded on black-oriented labels produced by the major record companies. She achieved enormous popularity and in 1927 became the highest-paid black artist in the world. D

The Harlem Renaissance represented a portion of the great social and cultural changes that swept America in the 1920s. The period was characterized by economic prosperity, new ideas, changing values, and personal freedom, as well as important developments in art, literature, and music. Most of the social changes were lasting. The economic boom, however, was short-lived.

MAIN IDEA

Summarizing D Besides literary accomplishments, in what areas did African Americans achieve remarkable results?

KEY PLAYER



DUKE ELLINGTON
1899–1974

Edward Kennedy "Duke" Ellington, one of the greatest composers of the 20th century, was largely a self-taught musician. He developed his skills by playing at family socials. He wrote his first song, "Soda Fountain Rag," at age 15 and started his first band at 22.

During the five years Ellington played at Harlem's glittering Cotton Club, he set a new standard, playing mainly his own stylish compositions. Through radio and the film short *Black and Tan,* the Duke Ellington Orchestra was able to reach nationwide audiences. Billy Strayhorn, Ellington's long-time arranger and collaborator, said, "Ellington plays the piano, but his real instrument is his band."

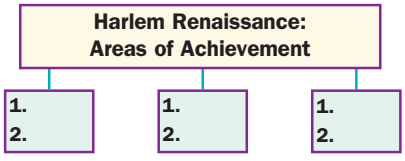
SECTION 4 ASSESSMENT

1. TERMS & NAMES For each term or name, write a sentence explaining its significance.

- Zora Neale Hurston
- James Weldon Johnson
- Marcus Garvey
- Harlem Renaissance
- Claude McKay
- Langston Hughes
- Paul Robeson
- Louis Armstrong
- Duke Ellington
- Bessie Smith

MAIN IDEA

2. TAKING NOTES
In a tree diagram, identify three areas of artistic achievement in the Harlem Renaissance. For each, name two outstanding African Americans.



Write a paragraph explaining the impact of these achievements.

CRITICAL THINKING

3. ANALYZING CAUSES
Speculate on why an African-American renaissance flowered during the 1920s. Support your answer. **Think About:**

- racial discrimination in the South
- campaigns for equality in the North
- Harlem's diverse cultures
- the changing culture of all Americans

4. FORMING GENERALIZATIONS
How did popular culture in America change as a result of the Great Migration?

5. DRAWING CONCLUSIONS
What did the Harlem Renaissance contribute to both black and general American history?